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True stories of Disabled Gay Men:
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AS A GOOD FATHER SHOULD

by Chris Hewitt

It was a wild night.

I looked out the French windows. The cherry trees, lit up by the house lights, thrashed their arms, laden with blossoms, against the black sky as if protesting the wind's violent disruption of their usual still Japanese elegance and serenity.

A crack of thunder, a sudden roar of rain on the roof, a mad blizzard of petals like pink snow, then, a loud knock at the kitchen door. We had just finished eating dinner, my mother, father, grandmother and I, and were still seated at table. My mother got up to answer the door. I expected to see a tramp begging for money or food, or a gypsy selling brushes, the usual visitors at that hour.

Instead, it was two men, steam rising from their shiny yellow slickers. The taller of the two, whose beard was red, told my mother that their van had broken down and asked if they could use our phone and if they might stay a few minutes to dry out and get warm. Naturally my

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mother, in the proper English way, invited them in and asked if they'd like a cup of tea.

As I had hoped, the taller one, who introduced himself as Andrew, sat down next to me at the table. "Hello, young man," he said (I was nine); "what's your name?" He began to tell me about his work. He and his friend, whose name was Colin, were veterinarians. I was so entranced and comforted by Andrew's large, masculine presence, that I hung on his every word. Outside, the lightning flashed, the thunder crashed even louder, but because he was there I didn't feel afraid, as I usually did.

Normally, whenever there was a storm, I would hide in the dark corridor between the kitchen and living room, where I couldn't see the lightning, and where the thunder was muffled. Even if lightning struck the house, I wouldn't care right now, I thought—Andrew was here.

It was his job, I learned, to go up on the moors in winter, when summoned by one of the farmers, to rescue stray lambs. Without the warmth and protection of their mothers and the rest of the flock, they would get confused and make poor choices when negotiating the snowy terrain, often slipping on the ice and breaking limbs, or tearing their flesh on the barbed wire fences.

Whenever I broke a limb and had to be hospitalized, my father never came to visit me. "It's not that he doesn't care," my mother would tell me. "It's that he cares so much that he can't bear to see you in pain." Once, when I had broken both arms and my pelvis in a fall from my wheelchair and was sobbing with pain even after my legs were put in casts, my father pushed his fist into my stomach, saying as he did so, "You'd better shut up or I'll give you something to really cry about."

On and on, deeper and deeper he pushed, until I let out such a loud scream that my mother screamed also and dragged him off me. I imagined, as Andrew spoke, that a lamb lying in the snow and whimpering in pain from a broken leg would feel as I did whenever I had an accident and broke bones, how that lamb would feel the same loneliness and desolation. How wonderful that Andrew could come and rescue him and scoop him up in his arms saying, "There, there, young fella, you'll be alright," as a good father should.

Eventually, of course, it came time for Andrew and Colin to leave. Thanking my mother profusely, they put on their slickers. Andrew gave

me a quick kiss; his beard tickled my cheek. How my heart ached as he trudged off into the dark. I wanted him to stay forever. I never saw him again.

Andrew must be in his seventies by now. He probably lives with his wife in a stone cottage on the moors. As he smokes his pipe and stares into the fire's dying embers on a wet stormy night, does he ever think of the crippled boy who, on another stormy night fifty years ago, listened to him in wide-eyed admiration?

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Illustration: "St. Joseph." Wood-engraving by Eric Gill, 1921

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CHRIS HEWITT's poetry and translations have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Advocate*, *American Poetry Review*, and *The James White Review*. Chris has osteogenesis imperfecta, "Brittle Bone Disease." Search Bent Voices and Archive to find more of Chris Hewitt's work in BENT.

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